

A Midsummer Night's Dream

VIENNA, VA

Wolf Trap Opera

8/17/10

Wolf Trap Opera's performance of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on Aug. 17 would have been memorable if only for the close of Act II, when the deep, shimmering quality of the score emerged to truly transfixing effect. As it turned out, the whole production, played out on Erhard Rom's abstract, unfussy scenic design, delivered abundant enchantment inside the ideally intimate space of the Barns at Wolf Trap.

The company's cast of young, up-and-coming artists met the music's challenges confidently and with sensitivity; the singers also created dynamic characterizations. Ryan Belongie's Oberon commanded attention from the start. The countertenor revealed a remarkably warm, evenly produced voice, and his supple phrasing included many an exquisite shade. With a slinky gown and elegant coif that recalled Ginger from the old TV show *Gilligan's Island*, Ashlyn Rust provided Tytania with an extra dash of allure in the battle of wits and tricks. A little edginess may have crept into the upper register, but the soprano's bright, clear tone nonetheless sailed through the music winningly.

The band of rustics left a vivid mark, especially during the *Pyramus and Thisbe* presentation, which inspired abundant vocal and theatrical flourish. Nicolas Masters was the amiable, warm-voiced Bottom. David Portillo had a romp as Flute, before and after donning *Thisbe* drag, and used his ardent tenor deftly. Michael Anthony McGee brought a sturdy baritone and terrific swagger to the role of Snug. Nathaniel Peake's Snout was another charmer, especially when scoring comic points as the tin-eared Wall in the play-within-the-opera. Kenneth Kellogg (*Quince*) and Daniel Billings (*Starveling*) completed the gang.

The pairs of lovers — Paul Appleby (*Lysander*), Chad Sloan (*Demetrius*), Rena Harms (*Helena*) and, offering a particularly well-burnished tone, Catherine Martin (*Hermia*) — were likewise well matched in voice and dramatic flair. Except for a tendency to deliver lines as if for the benefit of the hearing-impaired, Alexander Strain turned in a colorful, athletic portrayal of Puck. Members of the Arlington Children's Chorus filled out the onstage fairy population admirably.

Conductor Steven Osgood fashioned a balance between propulsion and gentle lingering, all the while drawing a cohesive performance from the orchestra, which spilled out of the pit onto the seating floor, yet never overwhelmed the singers.

Director Patrick Diamond uncorked the opera's humor with gusto, but he also ensured that both the dark and ethereal undercurrents of the plot received their due. Camille Assaf's costume design, a mix of the contemporary and the fanciful, neatly defined each group of characters, and the subtly applied lighting of Robert H. Grimes added considerably to a satisfying production.

TIM SMITH

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